NEWS LITERACY AND USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR NEWS IN FIVE STATES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Due to concern over misinformation, especially on social media, there is a need to improve the public's media literacy. This present research studies the news literacy in five states in Nigeria: Imo, Ondo, Rivers, Abuja, and Enugu. The focus is on knowledge about news production. The aim is to determine the level of knowledge about news production, to find out if news literacy is positively associated with paying attention to certain news quality indicators on social media, and to determine if news on social media is worth their time. The survey method was used for the study. It was discovered that people with higher news literacy are more likely to include social media in their news collection, but not as their only or main source of news. It was also discovered that the news brand, headline, accompanying picture, and the person who shared the news serve as indicators of news quality on social media that are positively associated with news literacy. Greater news literacy is negatively associated with paying attention to the number of shares, likes, and comments in all states. It was found that increasing people's news literacy might likely change the way they use social media for news, as well as their understanding that social media can be a useful way of staying informed but is unlikely to become their primary source of news, especially for those who know more about how the news is made. When deciding whether news on social media is going to be worth their time, those with higher literacy look out for quality cues rather than popularity cues. This is an indicator that news literacy programmes could usefully focus on teaching people how the news is made and that social networks could improve the quality of information they circulate by increasing the prominence of some indicators over others.

KEYWORDS: News, Social Media, News Literacy, Cues, Nigeria

Introduction

In a digital world that is complex and continuously developing, it is important to find out if the audience possesses the knowledge and skills needed to follow the present news environment in a way that is meaningful, considering the move from a relatively clear, structured, print and broadcast-dominated environment, to a digital world. This has created a renewed interest in news literacy among scholars, journalists, and policymakers.

Moreover, there is a considered major challenges over the spread of misinformation and information overload which has prompted studies that aim to measure the level of news literacy among the public and to explore the associations at the individual level between news literacy and patterns of news use (Ashley, 2019). More attention is given to social media because it is now a key source of news and information for many people in different states and nations.

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However, it is believed that effective use of social media for news may require a different set of knowledge and skills considering the differences in the range of available information sources, the role of gatekeepers, and the way information is packaged even if compared to apps and news websites.

In this study, an attempt is made to build upon existing research by exploring the public's news literacy, how people use social media for news, and what quality indicators people say they pay attention to when using social media for news.

Statement of the Problem

The spread of misinformation dates back at least to the early days of printing. The growth of the internet has, however, initiated a fundamental change. In 2013, the World Economic Forum warned that potential "digital wildfires" could cause the "viral spread" of intentional or unintentional misleading information (World Economic Forum, 2013). More specifically, concern over the spread of misinformation and information overload has prompted this study, which aims to measure the level of news literacy among the public. This study, therefore, investigates the public's news literacy and use of social media for news in five (5) states in Nigeria.

Research Objective

1.   To determine the knowledge about news production

2.   To find out if news literacy is positively associated with paying attention to certain news quality indicators on social media.

3.   Find out if news on social media worth their time.

News Literacy

Chambers Dictionary (2004) defines "news" as "information about recent events, now especially as reported in newspapers, on radio or TV, or via the internet." Wilson (2000) provided a number of definitions of news as defined by various scholars, such as:

a)   News is any fresh and unusual event

b)   The report or account of recent events or occurrence's brought to or coming to one as new information, new occurrence's as a subject of report or talk etc. However, news exists within the context of its audience.

According to Vraga, Tully, Maksl, Craft, and Ashley (2020), news literacy is knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, skills that allow users some control over these processes, and the news literacy behaviours that this knowledge can enable. People with a high level of news literacy may possess the knowledge required to be able to consume news from trustworthy sources, verify news content, and make use of reliable, credible cues. News literacy may also lead to news literacy behaviors.

On the kind of knowledge news literacy should cover, Vraga et al. (2020) suggest focusing on knowledge of the 5Cs: "context," "creation," "content," circulation," and "consumption." Some scholars define "news literacy" as factual knowledge about how the

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news is made (Newman et al. 2018). Others think of news literacy as awareness of phenomena like media influence and media functioning (Asraful et al. 2018) as opposed to factual knowledge. Despite the differences in definitions and conceptualizations of news literacy, empirical research mostly finds positive associations between news literacy and news literacy behaviors. Furthermore, most empirical studies suggest that news literacy can indeed help, as people with higher news literacy are less likely to see the media as hostile (Vraga & Tully 2015) and are less likely to endorse conspiracy theories (Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2017). According to Amazeen and Bucy (2019), some individuals with higher levels of news literacy are better able to identify fabricated news. An online survey was used to show respondents a series of real and "fake" news headlines, and it was found that people with higher levels of news literacy were able to better distinguish between the two.

Use of Internet and Social Media for News

The growth of the internet and social media gave rise to more sources of news consumption. Social media platforms are among the most important sources of news. In many countries, the internet now competes with television as people's main source of news. Social media can provide an alternative and less regulated space to access and engage with a wider variety of news. Social media, thus, provides an important channel for citizens to consume alternative news, opinions, and perspectives.

Meanwhile, what makes social media particularly influential are their expressive affordances, which enable individuals to leverage their online social networks to share information and news with exponentially more people than what was initially possible. There are, however, different ways of getting news online, such as via messaging apps, search engines, and social media (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018). Social media performs and meets different needs in people's news collection. Some depend heavily on social media as their main or perhaps only source of news, while for others, it might be just a small part of their overall news repertoire. All of this differs according to specific platforms, as people use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp in different ways, while of course, many people do not use social media at all.

The use of social media for news differs from using other sources, such as traditional media like print, TV, radio, or even news websites, in a number of ways. Firstly, the news that reaches users on social media is presented in the form of snippets, which contain a headline and picture to introduce the story and the name of the outlets that produced it (Anspach et al., 2019). Snippets, however, contain extra information that is unique to social media, such as the name of the user that retweeted or shared a news item and information about the level of interaction with that story from other users, e.g., the number of likes, dislikes, comments, and shares. These serve as other ways for users to make decisions about what to pay attention to on social media.

Evaluating News Worth and News Literacy.

People, most often rely on strategies initiated by certain actions or events since it is impossible to read all news and decide in advance whether a news item is likely to be worth their time (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The need to select among several alternatives gives rise to reliable action. Some piece or part can be used to draw conclusions about the quality of a particular news as people encountered news and information on social media. Some of these

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pieces or parts relate to the news and are thus relevant beyond news use on social media, e.g., the headline, news brand, and accompanying picture. Others describe how other users have reacted to that item eg, the number of likes, shares, comments and the person who shared it. Some of these parts will be more reliable than others.

One of the conspicuous parts available to users is the news brand that published the story originally. People associate different news brands with certain traits such as sincerity and sophistication and trust some news brands more than others (Newman et al., 2020). News brands are usually stable and consistent in the quality that they deliver, making them relatively reliable indicators of what to expect from content posted by a certain brand.

This is somewhat different when selection decisions follow cues given by the headline and picture accompanying a news item. Also, the headline and picture can give information about the topic and the nature of the message and are therefore important in establishing the value of a news item on dimensions other than the source. Meanwhile, due to news organizations' often desperate attempts to guide traffic to their website, headlines and pictures are usually as eye-catching as they are misleading (Scacco & Muddiman, 2020) and should hence be treated with care.

Social media has provided a new set of cues. In particular, continuing a research tradition that emphasizes the role of social media in persuasion (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), much research has focused on the importance of the person who shared the news content. Personal influence is discussed to be facilitated in social media and was indeed found powerful in that it reduced partisan selective exposure (Messing & Westwood, 2014), especially, when content was recommended by person's familiar to the individual.

Social Media State Differences

Social media has a different status as a source of news in different states, and it could be possible that news literacy relates differently to its use depending on that. Hence, for our study, we chose five states with different social media consumption patterns. In Rivers State, 32% use social media as a source of news, while in Imo State, 39% use social media as a source of news; this is followed by Abuja (45%), Ondo (53%), and Enugu (60%). Our sample includes North Central (Abuja), two South East (Imo and Enugu), one South West (Ondo) and one South South (Rivers).

Method

The researcher used data from a large cross-sectional online survey (N = 10595) to investigate the five states: Rivers, Imo, Abuja (FCT), Ondo, and Enugu. The data was gathered in 2020, and the same question was asked in all states. Samples in each state were based on age, gender, education, region, and individuals who indicated that they consume news less than once a month were filtered out.

Table 1: Demographic Data

State	Age (M)	(F)	Degree	Sample Size
Rivers	47.82	49%	24%	2038
Imo	49.50	54%	39%	2117

Abuja	48.32	54%	32%	2401
Ondo	46.20	50%	29%	2016
Enugu	46.85	52%	47%	2023

Public News Literacy

Public news literacy, in this study, is seen as how knowledgeable the people are about the making of news. Using four multiple-choice questions, this knowledge was assessed (Vraga et al., 2020). Questions asked includes how news if financed, who is making the news, how it is selected and how about its financial state more generally.

Table 2: % of correct answers per question per state

News literacy question	Correct response is underlined	% correct responses (States)					
		States	Rivers	Imo	Abuja	Ondo	Enugu
Which of the following outlets does NOT depend primarily on advertising for financial support	ITV BBC Guardian Daily Trust Don't Know	63%	59%	77%	47%	78%	53%
Which of the following is typically responsible for writing a press release?	A reporter for a news organization A spokesperson for an organization A law A producer for a news organization Don't know	35%	33%	40%	36%	45%	22%
How are most of the individual decisions about what By computer analysis of what stories might interest you news stories to show people on Facebook made	By editors and journalists that work for facebook By editors and journalists that work for news outlets At random Don't know	30%	29%	31%	28%	31%	29%
Which of the following best describes the financial performance of most newspaper wbsite apps?	Most of them make a profit Most of them just cover their cost Most of them make a loss Don't know	12%	9%	13%	11%	14%	10%
Total		10595	2038	2117	2401	2016	2023

Note: "Don't know responses were treated as wrong"

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Table 2 shows that varying difficulty was reached as some questions drew many and others only a few correct responses. Across states, 63% of individuals knew that the BBC does not depend primarily on advertising, 35% knew that an organizations spokesperson is typically responsible for writing a press release, and 30% were aware that news presented on Facebook is algorithmically selected. Only 12% across all states assessed correctly that most newspaper websites and apps make a financial loss.

Findings

Research question one: What is the knowledge about news production?

It was also discovered that people with higher news literacy are more likely to include social media into their news source list, but as their main source of news. Those who know more about how news is made understand that social media can be a useful way of staying informed but are unlikely to make it their primary source of news.

Research question two: Is the news literacy positively associated with paying attention to certain news quality indicators on social media?

Findings revealed that news literacy is positively associated with paying attention to certain news quality indicators on social media, such as the news brand, the individual or person that shared the news and the picture and news headline. In the States, greater news literacy is negatively associated with paying attention to the number of likes, comments, and shares

Research question three: Does news on social media worth their time?

Findings shows that those with higher news literacy look out for quality rather than popularity cues. This suggests that news literacy programmes could improve the quality of information they circulate by increasing the prominence of some indicators over others.

Discussion

Findings give support to the idea that increasing the public's news literacy has the potential to change the way people use social media for news. Those who know more about how the news is made knew that social media can be a way of staying informed across the states studied. Public's news literacy programmes could focus on educating people how the news is made. Also, findings reveal that people with higher news literacy seems to know what to look for.

In this study, the researcher asked the respondents who they think is responsible for a press release or whether algorithms and journalists are behind most of what we see on social media. This obviously is very specific knowledge and it may be right to ask whether ordinary citizens are truly better off if they possess it especially, if we consider that the news / information atmosphere we live in today changes quickly and some of this knowledge will soon be outdated. Behind this lies the larger question of whether news literacy can be thought as "critical," "essential," or a "precondition" for effective use of the news. The need to acknowledge that news and knowledge about how news is made touch upon only one aspect of democratic citizens' lives. Democratic societies like Nigeria are complex structures and any knowledge gain about any part of it will inevitably help citizens become confident and mindful,

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able to face and act upon various, sometimes difficult circumstances be it period of national or global uncertainty.

News and knowledge about the specific technological and institutional structures in which it is made should be recognized as another important area of the wider structure that hosts all institutions that enable democracy. It is therefore important that education focus on the matter of news. Especially as public news literacy education is very much a self-help measure.

Conclusion

It was discovered that across all five states, people with higher levels of news literacy are more likely to have social media as part of their news repertoire. However, those with lower levels of literacy say it is their main source of news compared to print, television, and radio. Invariably, this means higher news literacy is associated with using social media as a supplement to other sources of news and information. Also, the researcher found out that news literacy is positively associated with paying attention to certain news quality indicators on social media, such as the news brand, the person who shared the news, and the accompanying picture and headline. News literacy is negatively associated with paying attention to the number of likes, comments, and shares a news story has. This means that ideas about what constitutes news literacy, though developed within the context of Nigeria, may be replicable elsewhere. More information on how people with varying levels of news literacy navigate information and news was added.

Recommendation

It is recommended that formal education and beyond focus on the matter of news, especially as news literacy education is very much a self-help measure.

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